

COMMUNITY★STAR

WHEN WAR HIT HOME



SUSAN DEMAR LAFFERTY/DAILY SOUTHTOWN

A small crowd attends a service June 4 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the explosion at the Joliet Army Ammunitions Plant, which claimed the lives of 48.

Heroes remembered on 75th anniversary of arsenal explosion

BY SUSAN DEMAR LAFFERTY
Daily Southtown

In June 1942, World War II was raging in the Pacific, the Battle of Midway was underway, and closer to home in Will County, 48 people were killed and another 46 injured in an explosion at the Joliet Army Ammunitions Plant in Elwood. It was the greatest loss of civilian life at a munitions plant during the war.

A statue of a munitions worker, lunchbox in hand, was erected in 2001 near the entrance to the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery to honor those killed and

hurt as well as the thousands who worked at the arsenal through three wars: World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

It was here that family of the fallen gathered with members of the Midewin Heritage Association on the afternoon of June 4 to honor those who gave their lives to the war effort and to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the June 5, 1942, blast that rocked the region in the wee hours of a Friday morning.

All that Keith McCawley has left of the grandfather he never knew, Lawrence A. McCawley, is the ring he wore to work that day. That's how the family identified

his remains; the stone the ring once held was lost in the explosion.

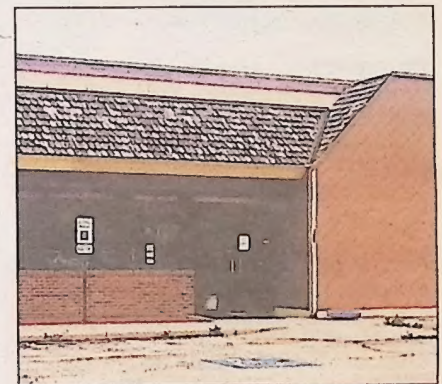
The Army compensated families who lost loved ones with a one-time payment of \$5,000, Keith McCawley said.

Nancy Rossmiller, of Plainfield, came to honor her great "Uncle Dean," Harold Dean Harper, her grandmother's younger brother, who was only 20 years old when he died.

"There were no remains. He was blown to bits," she said.

"It's wonderful that they did this. They

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sacrificed a lot," Rossmiller said of Saturday's memorial. She said she doubts her family members are aware of the statue honoring the munitions workers, but she plans to let them know.

Bernie Levati was not alive when his uncle, Frank Levati, the oldest of the four brothers in his father's family, was killed. The other three boys served overseas during the war, and all returned unharmed, he said. Only Frank, who remained at home, died.

"The loss goes farther than that. I never got to meet my grandfather, who died a year and a half later of a broken heart," Levati said.

Families had to visit a warehouse at Cass and Joliet streets in Joliet to identify their husbands, sons and brothers by their body parts, he said.

"Basically, there were just pieces of people," Levati said. "My dad said my grandfather was never the same after that."

Levati later worked briefly at the arsenal, during the summer of 1967, and said it was "spooky" to return to the site.

The arsenal was the biggest employer in Will County at that time, and this explosion was the "biggest tragedy in Will County," he said.

The Joliet Arsenal once spanned 23,542 acres along Route 53 in Elwood, housed 1,391 buildings and employed about 22,000 workers at its peak production in the 1940s, manufacturing TNT, according to historical and news accounts.

The explosion occurred at what was known as the Elwood Ordnance Plant, in building 10, where anti-tank mines were being loaded into railroad boxcars to be shipped.

"In an instant, it became a 12-foot-deep crater," said Lorin Schab, president of the Midewin Heritage Association.

The explosion was ruled an accident by a Will County coroner's jury, but the exact cause was never determined, he said.

"What we do know is the workers were doing more than just a job. They were helping fight the war," Schab said. "They were on the homefront, supporting fathers and sons on the war front."

Efforts to erect the statue as a memorial to the munitions workers was spearheaded by Elmo Younger, of Morris, who worked at the arsenal then, but on a different shift, loading materials into a warehouse.

He was at home in Joliet when he heard the blast at 2:43 a.m. that June 5 morning, and he knew there had been an explosion at the plant, he said. When he reported to work at 8 a.m., there was "debris scattered in different places."

"No one was allowed to go there because they were still finding body parts," he said.



Keith McCawley holds the ring his grandfather wore on the day he was killed in an explosion at the Joliet Arsenal, and was used to identify him.

Younger was drafted into the Army in December 1942 and served 3½ years in Europe, achieving the rank of sergeant.

When he returned and learned nothing had been done to recognize the munitions workers, he launched a fundraising campaign to honor what he calls "homefront heroes."

The name of each worker is carved into the base of the statue, along with the names of two other workers killed at the arsenal in another explosion in 1945.

The statue was erected in 2001 but stolen in 2005, according to accounts. Younger said "an anonymous donor from Morris" provided funds for another statue, which was installed in 2008. (The original statue was later found in a silo in Braceville in 2008 and is now the property of the village of Elwood, Schab said.)

Today the statue stands on land donated by CenterPoint Intermodal Center, which abuts Lincoln Cemetery, visible on the north side of Hoff Road as visitors drive into the cemetery.

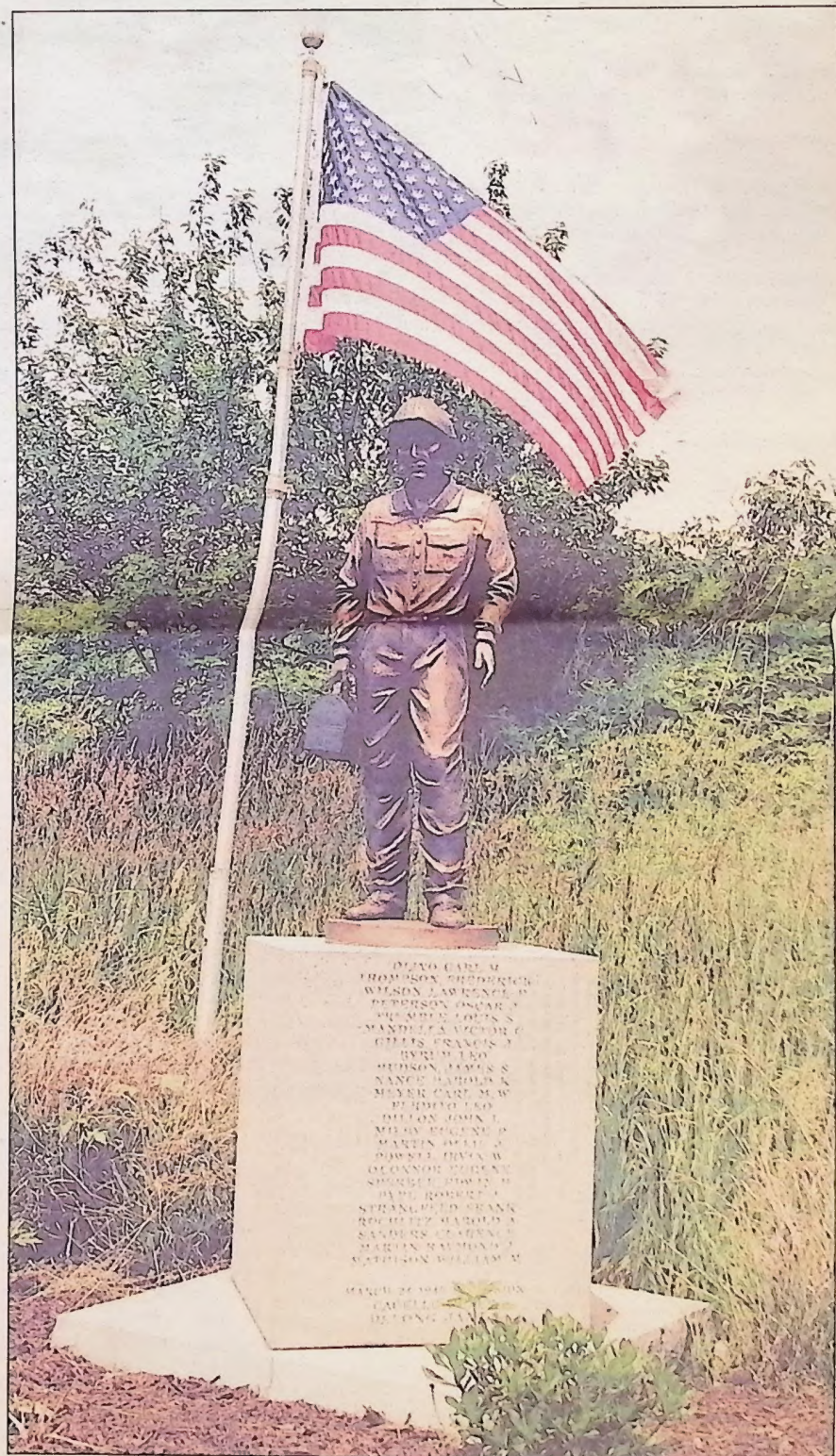
On this 75th anniversary, Younger donated it to the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

It eventually be will relocated to "its rightful place where the tragedy took place" to make sure "this history is not lost," Midewin Supervisor Wade Spang said.

"It is so significant that this piece of hallowed ground is part of Midewin's history," Spang said. "A lot happened here during the Army's days, and a lot is happening now as we are restoring the prairie, which this will be part of."

"It will stay here so people can see it forever and forever."

The arsenal stopped production in 1976 and closed for good in the 1990s.



SUSAN DEMAR LAFFERTY/DAILY SOUTHTOWN PHOTOS

A statue of a munitions worker serves as a reminder of the lives that were lost in an June 5, 1942, explosion at the Joliet Army Ammunitions Plant.

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